

Ancient Olympics: modern myths

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The re-founding of the Olympic games in the last years of the 19th century is a fascinating example of what is now called the reception of the Classical world. The site of Olympia had recently been rediscovered and German archaeologists had commenced excavating it. This provoked widespread interest across Western Europe, especially with one man in particular, a wealthy French aristocrat named Baron Pierre de Coubertin. De Coubertin decided that the Olympic Games themselves should be reinstated.

From its very inception De Coubertin and his supporters wanted these Olympics to be a paragon of authenticity. Enormous effort was expended in scouring the ancient literary texts and the, albeit very fragmentary, archaeological evidence to find out quite what events should be included and how they were performed. In some cases this led to some tricky and indeed insuperable problems, including how to deal with the impossibly long 'Long Jump'.

Mens sana in corpore sano: three times round the games field

Who were the revived Olympics for? The motivation for De Coubertin in resuscitating the Olympic games was to improve the low morale of the French aristocratic youth following their defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. De Coubertin was a firm believer that the mind could only be trained if the body was at the same time. However, it was not from reading ancient Greek texts that he had reached these conclusions but from visiting English Public Schools.

It was in schools such as Rugby and Eton that a regime of physical education had been instituted side by side with the more traditional classroom pursuits in the hope that strenuous exertion might put a stop to the numerous riots that had blighted such establishments. This new emphasis on the link between healthy body and healthy mind derived its roots not from the old Hellenic concept of the importance of sport as a mark of culture and education, but a more recent cultural channel, Christian ascetic practice.

The modern Olympics, like the their ancient counterparts, were to be *exclusive* events, but unlike the latter which was open only to Greeks, De Coubertin had in mind the élite of Europe and America. There would be no place for the vulgar material gain associated with the working classes. Amateurism and natural athleticism would rule the day. Present restrictions were justified by the example of the past.

The threat of professionalism

De Coubertin was aided and abetted in his use of the ancient Olympics by several Classical scholars. Perhaps, his most ardent and effective academic supporter was an Englishman, E. N. Gardiner. Gardiner, a school master, wrote a book, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, in which he argued that the high point of Greek athleticism had been in the early fifth century when well born youths had participated in the games for the pure enjoyment of physical effort and competition. But after this it began to decline due to 'the excessive prominence given to bodily excellence and athletic success', which had produced specialization and professionalism. In Gardiner's opinion 'sport

Inventing the Triple Jump

The ancient Greek texts stated that two athletes had jumped around 55 feet. This is obviously an enormous distance and far beyond the normal human range. The administrators of these new Olympics tried everything to facilitate the jumping of this kind of distance including getting some unfortunate victims to jump down steep hills! The only thing that De Coubertin and his colleagues did not question were the ancient sources themselves. We now accept that record and measurement were not as important to the ancient Greeks as they are to us; numerical exaggeration is certainly not unheard of. Eventually, an ingenuous solution was found. A new event, the Triple Jump was invented. In this way the correct distances could be achieved and the veracity of the ancient texts could remain unchallenged.

To invent a new event rather than challenge the accuracy of a literary source from the distant past strikes us as rather odd. However, in the late 19th century, the Classical world had taken on an aura of near sacrosanctity. For the Victorian student of ancient Greece, there was a great deal at stake. These Hellenists strongly believed that the study of Ancient Greece would help instill the correct values in their own contemporary society. That only the educated few would be able to partake in this self-improvement gives us a clear indication that a desire for egalitarianism was not at the fore-

became more and more the monopoly of the lower classes'.

Gardiner's anxieties have to be placed within the context of a period of traumatic changes in British sport. In football the day of the gentleman amateur playing for teams such as the Corinthian Casuals was drawing to a close, it was now the professional teams made up of working men who were paid for their efforts such as Blackburn Rovers that had come to predominate. The Rugby world was now split between the professional northern league clubs and the amateur union south. For Gardiner, a committed amateur, sport saw encroaching professionalism as a catastrophe and he was certainly not frightened of making an explicit link between present troubles and past decline.

In his *Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals* he wrote:

Of the evils of professionalism this is no place to speak... the history of football during the last two years is ominous... the rugby union has struggled manfully to uphold the purity of the game... under these circumstances the history of the decline of Greek athletics is an object lesson of obstruction.

However, Gardiner's ideas on ancient Greek amateurism and athleticism were as misguided as they were popular. Gardiner completely misunderstood or willfully misrepresented the true nature of ancient Greek sportsmanship. The distinction that Gardiner created between amateurism and professionalism would have baffled the ancient Greeks. It has now been conclusively proved that for the ancient Olympics, not only were the athletes taken from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and that they would be expected to train hard but also that the winners would be rewarded materially. The irony is that the 21st century Olympics of tennis pros and basketball dream team so bemoaned by the 'traditionalists' in fact far more closely

resembles its ancient predecessor than their own vision of amateurism.

So the modern Olympics were set up to fulfill a very similar set of functions to that of their ancient predecessors: the creation and maintenance of an élite for which athletic excellence was not the only attribute which decided whether an individual or group were fit to participate. In the ancient Olympics the deciding qualification was to be Greek. For the modern games it was to be those who saw themselves as the true heirs of the Classical tradition.

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'The young Greek athlete spent the eve before the contest in solitude and contemplation under the marble porticoes of the gymnasium at Olympia, situated a little way off to the side, far from the temples and the noise. He was required to be irreproachable personally and by heredity, without the slightest blemish either in his own life or that of his ancestors...He received as recompense (for victory) a simple verdant branch-the symbol of disinterestedness.'

De Coubertin *La Preface des Jeux Olympiques*